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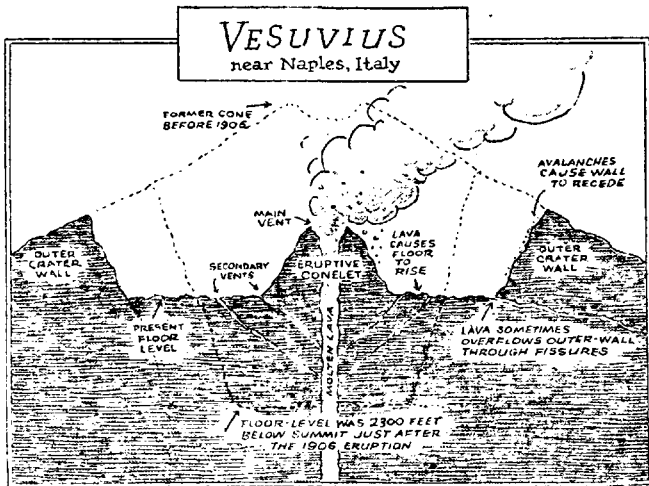
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A TRIP TO THE CRATER OF VESUVIUS

EDWARD M. SCHOENBORN, JR., Ch.E., 3



Cross Section of Mt. Vesuvius

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is a second article in a series by the author, who traveled extensively through Europe during the past year.

Vesuvius looms up beyond the city of Naples, Italy, a lazy and menacing giant of nature. It commands the beautiful blue bay at its innermost point and stretches its rugged crater gaping to the sky. From its crest effuses an eternal wisp of steam and vapor which often envelops the surrounding territory like a downy blanket. When the wind is to the west this heavy haze rolls down and into the bay so that the mountain is, for the greater part, hidden from view; but when it blows in the opposite direction, the bold outlines of this majestic product of nature are then sharply delineated against the sky, and there is created a most unique and enthralling scene.

Like the Sword of Damocles, Vesuvius is still an object of apprehension to those who live in its shadow, since it constantly reminds the world of its great hidden activity. It never ceases to smoke or belch forth lava, and often gives out violent utterances of warning in the way of an occasional grumble or tremor. Even at night the dull red glow, suffused about its peak like a bloody halo, manifests the presence of a subterranean inferno.

I doubt if there are many visitors to Italy, especially to the region about Naples, who, despite the awe the spectacle of Vesuvius inspires, do not experience a curiosity to climb to its topmost crag, stand close to the rim and gaze into the molten cavern. At least such were my desires when, one morning last March, our ship steamed into the bay of Naples and I saw for the first time a real and active volcano. Presumably others too had been so impressed, and it was not long after docking that a little group had formed and ventured out on the wharves in search of information in regard to the trip to the crater and a suitable guide to make the proper arrangements. We found both readily enough and learned that the proper weather conditions prevailing, we could go up only in the afternoon, since the funicular train made but two trips every clear day. Should the wind change adversely, so one guide told us,

it would be quite useless to attempt the journey, as we would not go far until the smoke and sulphur fumes would cause us to turn back. Besides, no view of the bay would be possible, which alone was worth the trip.

At the appointed hour that afternoon, we met our guide once more. Conditions were evidently favorable as he had several cars waiting to convey us to Pugliano, a suburb of Naples at the base of the mountain from which we were to begin our ascent by rail. It did not take us long to wind our way through the narrow, wash-bedecked streets of the city and consequently soon found ourselves in the little station of the Mt. Vesuvius Electric Railway.

The journey to the crater, a distance of twelve miles, is made in three stages. At the first station, we boarded a small electric tram car and began to wind tortuously through the foothills, at the same time nearing our goal vertically by climbing, for the greater part, a 25 per cent grade. As we continued, the great mass of the cone above us became constantly larger and larger, and appeared to jump from one side of the car to the other as we jogged in and out of gigantic scars cut into the solid rock and lava formations. For awhile, we passed through fertile valleys, dotted with the little farms and homesteads of those more courageous natives, who, unperturbed over past actions of the volcano, still eke out a living from a burned-out soil. Here are delightful vineyards, fields, and gardens. Retaining walls and dams of lava block, besides being picturesque, serve to prevent the loss of the softer loam with its vegetation during the rainy season and its accompanying mountain torrents.

At Eremo, the second station, we found the Mt. Vesuvius Observatory, a restaurant, depot, and a few shops. The grade becomes steeper, though less jagged here, and so our little car acquired aid for the continued ascent in the form of a funicular engine geared to the tracks. During this lap of the journey we were pushed to a height of about 2,200 feet leaving behind all vegetation and entering regions of grotesque and desolate formations of naked lava. Here were great rivers of it that seemed to have become frozen even as they had flowed on. Where the rock was cut away for passage of our engine, one could count the very layers, as time had seen them deposited. We noticed in various places the strange differences of color between certain lava flows. Here was a great sheet of the brown variety; there, sometimes on top of it, an ashy black one. In answer to our queries our guide informed us that the lava had been deposited during separate eruptions, the brown stuff dating from that of A.D. 79, at which time Pompeii and Herculaneum were destroyed; the black deposit being quite recent, having been erupted in 1906. This, we saw, was quite plausible, since the lower layers were in each case brown, the upper and later ones black.

At a height of almost 4,000 feet, we reached

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what appeared to be a shelf or ledge near the base of the actual crater. It seemed to rise straight above our heads. Here was another little station and we changed cars this time to one drawn by cable, which was to take us directly to the summit. We climbed almost perpendicularly, so it seemed to us, though the grade now was about 50 per cent. Our ears began to throb because of the rarity of the atmosphere; the odor of sulphurous fumes came down to us with almost every breath of the wind. Our car being built in step formation, it was easy for us now to look back on our trail, and as the wind was blowing in the proper direction we could obtain a delightful view of the bay, the city, and its surroundings. The afternoon sun had come out over the bay, causing it to be transformed into a beautiful silvery blue mirror, stretching from the city at our feet out to the horizon. We saw ships steam placidly in and out of the harbor now and then, leaving a shining trail in their wakes; but from our height they seemed to be but miniatures.

When we stepped upon the platform next time we had reached the rim of the crater. In order to obtain a good and safe view of the inner cone, it was necessary that we walk a short distance up and along a narrow ledge several feet wide. Several hundred feet from the station a small shelf forms an observation point and from there we were able to look across at the opposite rim of the crater nearly 2,500 feet away. An immense floor of steaming lava lies 2,300 feet below the rim, at the center of which rises a smaller volcano in the form of a large cone. This is the primary outlet. Great clouds of steam and yellow sulphurous vapor issue forth in an unbroken column accompanied by deep, thunderous roars. We remained only long enough to take a few snap-shots since we could barely stand against the tremendous draft which tended to suck us into the pit, and the nauseating gases would no doubt overcome us eventually. Our guide told us that we might climb down to the floor level if we so desired, but that it was extremely dangerous and we could do so only at our own risk. On walking back to the car we picked up numerous pieces of lava for souvenirs and from several attendants along the way bought chunks of it with sulphur deposits on them or fantastically carved pieces on which coins had been imbedded while still molten.

On our return we learned a few interesting facts concerning Vesuvius. Our guide told us that the first eruption known was that of A.D. 79 in which the entire southwestern half of the crater had been thrown down burying so completely Herculaneum and Pompeii that it was not until comparatively recently that excavations in these regions were begun. Numerous other eruptions occurred from time to time since then, building up the cone, almost to its present height. However, in April of 1906, the most notable eruption of recent years took place, lasting for seven days. Naples was covered with a dense pall, and lava continued to flow for four days. It is said that on subsequent examination 350 feet of the top had been blown off, changing its conical form and enlarging the crater mouth to its present size. Avalanches and a continual lava-flow from the

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eruptive cone and smaller vents are gradually raising the floor level. Hence, while in but a moment of anger Vesuvius throws itself into a violent paroxysm and tears itself apart, yet on the other hand it works tediously for years to build itself up again. Vesuvius has tremendous energy at hand but spends it only in self-destruction.
